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ABSTRACT

The relationship between athletics and delinquency is investigated with emphasis on whether the relationship changes when differentiating between types of delinquent behavior. The overall findings indicate a negative relationship between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency. Data supports the deterrent hypothesis and indicates that athletes on the whole tend to be less delinquent than non-athletes. This study suggests that the association between athletics and delinquency is a function of the degree of athletic participation, the type of offense committed, and the social class background of the subjects tested. Data obtained in this research are appended in tabular form. (JD)

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Athletic Delinquency: A Preliminary Approach.

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A paper presented at the 94th Annual Convention of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education and Recreation.

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Introduction

The relationship between participation in interscholastic athletics and juvenile delinquency has more recently become the focus of systematic research. Previous statements concerning the role of athletics in deterring juvenile delinquency were by and large subjective in nature and empirically unsubstantiated (Nolan, 1955; Waller, 1965; Ferdinand, 1966). As such, athletics were merely assumed to exert a positive influence on the overall socialization of the individual (Educational Policies Commission, 1954). However, certain empirical evidence now exists in support of the deterrent hypothesis (Schafer and Polk, 1967; Schafer, 1969; Buhrmann, 1977). This evidence suggests that athletes do on the whole appear to be less delinquent and deviant than non-athletes. Moreover, the overall association between athletics and delinquency has been shown to be the product of a relationship among lower socio-economic groups (Schafer, 1969; Buhrmann, 1977).

Although the preventitive effect of participation in athletics on delinquency has received some support, investigations to date have not permitted a more refined statement about the relationship by classifying the type of delinquent behavior. Schafer's (1969) research for example, made no distinction between the kind or seriousness of the actual delinquent behavior. Based on existing court records, Schafer's measurement of juvenile delinquency remained "only a gross indicator" (p.44). In Landers and Landers (1978) investigation into the effects of participation in extracurricular activities on delinquency, a lack of data prevented a meaningful breakdown of the delinquency variable by type of offense[2]. In other words, juvenile delinquency has typically been viewed as a discrete variable. The type or seriousness of offense has

not been taken into account in the formulation of the deterrent hypothesis. This would appear to be a significant omission since delinquent behavior may be clearly differentiated in terms of gravity. Society for example, tends to be more lenient to those who have committed misdemeanor offenses than to those convicted of felony charges.

By failing to look at the relationship between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency by type of offense, research has failed to identify the sort of delinquency which distinguishes one group from another. It is not possible to state that athletes are more or less likely to be involved in certain types of delinquency compared to non-athletes, but only that they are likely to be less delinquent. The lack of distinction between kinds of juvenile delinquency has resulted in what appears to be contradictory statements about the relationship between athletics and delinquency. While empirical research supports the deterrent hypothesis, there are those who suggest that participation in athletics might actually promote certain types od delinquency - in short, there exists an 'athletic delinquency'[3]. The nature of this 'athletic delinquency' though remains largely undiagnosed in the empirical sense[4].

Purpose

The purpose of the present study is to (1) further investigate the relationship between athletics and delinquency, and (2) see if the relationship between athletics and delinquency changes by differentiating between types of delinquent behavior. In this way the study attempts to take a preliminary look at the type of delinquency that is likely to distinguish between different groups of juveniles, and particularily those involved in 'athletic delinquency'.

Method

Populations

Findings of the investigation are based upon data obtained from self-report questionnaires administered to 179 male students from three selected state high schools. The questionnaires garnered selected characteristics of the sample including age, social class background, participation in athletics, self-reported acts of juvenile delinquency, and attitudes towards the seriousness of specific offenses.

Variables

Social class background. The social class background of each subject was analysed from information concerning (1) father's occupation, (2) mother's occupation, (3) father's educational status, (4) mother's educational status, and (5) annual family income. Social class background was dichotomized into high and low categories on the basis of the social class scales devised by Hollingshead (1964).

Athletic participation. The athletic experience and degree of participation of each subject was ascertained from information concerning (1) the number of school athletic teams represented, and (2) the number of school intramural teams represented. Scores were weighted in favor of athletic team participation since interscholastic athletics is typically subject to more influence and control, is accorded greater prestige, and requires more time than intramural sports.

Juvenile delinquency. Information concerning the delinquent behavior of each subject was determined from 24 questions on self-reported acts of juvenile delinquency. The questions were based on the scales developed by Nye and Short (1957) and Wolfgang and Sellin (1964).

Seriousness of offense. Information concerning the seriousness of

offenses was taken from 24 questions on attitudes towards the perceived gravity of specific acts of juvenile delinquency. The seriousness index was developed from the questions devised by Wolfgang and Sellin (1964). The 24 questions incorporated into the seriousness index corresponded directly with the 24 questions used in the delinquency questionnaire. In accordance with the procedures laid down by Wolfgang and Sellin (1964) specific offenses were identified as to their perceived degree of seriousness. Offenses were classified into high and low categories on the basis of the mean scores attributed to each of the 24 offenses.

Statistical analysis

For the purpose of statistical analysis the Chi-square test was used ($p < .01$).

Findings

The relationship between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency.

A comparison of the delinquent behavior of the subjects by degree of athletic participation is presented in Table 1. No distinction is made between type of offense. The data show a higher rate of delinquency among

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Table 1 about here

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those reporting a high degree of athletic involvement compared to those indicating a low degree of participation.

Dichotomizing the independent variable into athlete and non-athlete,

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Table 2 about here

Table 2 reveals a negative association between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency. Among the present sample those engaged in athletics

appear to be less delinquent than those who are not. This suggests that the degree of athletic participation is less significant than simply whether an individual participates or not.

The data in Table 3 report the rates of delinquency among athletes and non-athletes when the delinquent behavior is categorized as more serious (e.g. offenses involving major stealing, physical assault, breaking and entering, and drug trafficing). Among athletes only 31.1% report involvement

Table 3 about here

in serious delinquent behavior compared to 70.2% of non-athletes. Classifying the offense as more serious clearly reduces the rates of delinquency within both groups. The reduction however, is greater fro athletes (18.1%) than non-athletes (8.5%).

In summary the present data indicate that the overall relationship between athletics and delinquency is a function of both the degree of athletic involvement and the seriousness of the offense. The more serious the offense, the greater the influence that participation in athletics would seem to have on reducing the chances of juveniles becoming involved in delinquent behavior.

<u>The relationship between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency by social class background</u>.

The overall relationship between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency by social class background is presented in Tables 4 and 5. The data in Table 4 compare the delinquency rates for athletes and non-athletes within each of the categories of social class background when no distinction

Table 4 about here

is made between type of offense. Rates of delinquency are higher among sub-

jects classified as low class compared to those categorised as high class, and among athletes defined as low class compared to athletes determined as high class. Social class background would clearly seem to be an important variable operating within the overall relationship between athletics and delinquency.

Table 5 contains the delinquency rates for athletes and non-athletes by social class background when the delinquency is defined as more serious. Findings indicate an overall reduction in rates of delinquency. This is most evident among the high class sample. Among non-athletes 27.3% report

Table 5 about here

involvement in serious delinquent behavior and among athletes only 6.0% indicate serious delinquency. These data confirm that among the present sample the relationship between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency is a function of the gravity of the offense and the social class background of the subjects. In short, when delinquency is defined as more serious, the deterrent aspect of athletics is most potent among high class youths.

The relationship between athletic participation and drug involvement.

Analysis of the drug involvement among athletes and non-athletes is given in Table 6. The data indicate a high rate of drug usage among both groups. The high rate among athletes (62.1%) is particularily marked. It

Table 6 about here

is possible that 'athletic drugs' (e.g. cotizone) constitutes a confounding variable in this finding. Even so, it would appear that drug usage is not as uncommon among athletes as often believed. This is especially suprising

since the present sample represents high school youths.

Conclusion

The overall findings of the present study indicate a negative relationship between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency. The data support the deterrent hypothesis and show that athletes on the whole tend to be less delinquent than non-athletes. Moreover, this study suggests that the association between athletics and delinquency is a function of the degree of athletic participation, the type of offense, and the social class background of the subjects tested.

Of particular interest, this study reports findings which indicate a differential association between athletics and juvenile delinquency based on the perceived seriousness of the delinquent behavior. In other, rates of delinquency among the present sample of athletes decreased significantly when the offense was categorised as more serious. This was found to be particularily pertinent among the high social class group and among high social class athletes.

The suprisingly high level of juvenile delinquency initially reported (Tables 1 and 2) lends support to the notions of an 'athletic delinquency'. However, it would appear that this form of delinquency is based more on minor offenses than on serious delinquent behavior. These minor offenses include drunkenness, neighborhood disturbances, petty theft and the like - offenses which are more likely to be commonly witnessed and reported by society in general. The high level of drug usage among athletes likewise suggests that the 'delinquency of athletics' may not be that serious, especially in view of the levity with which drug usage crimes are perceived today. Serious delinquency would in fact seem to be more a characteristic

of the behavior of those not involved in athletics than those who are. In brief, the present evidence suggests that the phenomenon of 'athletic delinquency' may not be seriously anti-social, although it may be eminently more visible to society.

TABLE 1: A COMPARISON OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY BY DEGREE OF ATHLETIC PARTICIPATION

	Delinquent	Non-Delinquent	Total	N
High degree of athletic involvement	62.8%	37.2%	100%	(78)
Low Degree of athletic involvement	52.2%	47.5%	100%	(101)

Note - $X^2 = 1.52$, df = 1, p = 0.3

TABLE 2: A COMPARISON OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AMONG ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES

	Delinquent	Non-Delinquent	Total	N
Athlete	49.2%	50.8%	100%	(132)
Non-Athlete	78.7%	21.3%	100%	(47)

Note - $X^2 = 11.12$, df = 1, p = 0.001

TABLE 3: A COMPARISON OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AMONG ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES BY SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE

	Delinquent	Non-Delinquent	Total	N
Athlete	31.1%	68.9%	100%	(132)
Non-Athlete	70.2%	29.8%	100%	(47)

Note - $X^2 = 20.32$, df = 1, p = 0.001

TABLE 4: A COMPARISON OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AMONG ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES BY SOCIAL CLASS BACKGROUND

	Delinquent	Non-Delinquent	Total	N
High Class				
Athlete	38.0%	62.0%	100%	(50)
Non-Athlete	45.5%	54.5%	100%	(11)
Low Class				
Athlete	56.1%	43.9%	100%	(82)
Non-Athlete	88.9%	11.1%	100%	(36)

Note - $X^2 = 13.44$, df = 1, p = 0.001

TABLE 5: A COMPARISON OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AMONG ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES BY SOCIAL CLASS BACKGROUND AND SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE

	Delinquent	Non-Delinquent	Total	N
High Class				
Athlete	6.0%	94.0%	100%	(50)
Non-Athlete	27.3%	72.7%	100%	(11)
Low Class				
Athlete	46.3%	53.7%	100%	(82)
Non-Athlete	83.3%	16.7%	100%	(36)

Note - $X^2 = 16.87$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.001$

TABLE 6: A COMPARISON OF DRUG INVOLVEMENT AMONG ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES

	Use	Non-Use	Total	N
Athlete	62.1%	37.9%	100%	(132)
Non-Athlete	70.2%	29.8%	100%	(47)

Note - $X^2 = 0.67$, df = 1, p = 0.5

References

1. Some of the information in this paper appears in another paper entitled "Athletics and Juvenile Delinquency", co-authored with Donald B. Chu. For an extended and more comprehensive analysis the reader is referred to that paper, copies of which may be obtained from the author. This paper focuses on the relationship between athletic participation and juvenile delinquency as a function of the type of delinquent offense and therefore facilitates a discussion about the little researched phenomenon of 'athletic delinquency'. This paper also includes information not presented in "Athletics and Juvenile Delinquency".

2. Landers and Landers (1978) note that "of the 87 total delinquent acts, only 10 were felony convictions and these were all found in the "neither" (athlete or servise) category" (p.301).

3. On the topic of 'athletic delinquency' sociologist Charles Page surmizes in Sociology of Sport (Kenyon, G.S. (ed), Chicago; The Athletic Institute, 1969): "...its been the experience of a good many of us...that we have been taught by coaches and those of us who have been coaches have probably been guilty of these lessons occassionally. We have been taught a lot of delinquency, a lot of dirty play...I think it still goes on at least in some sports at even the high school level" (p.49).

4. For a more complete discussion of deviant sub-cultures in athletics and sport the reader is referred to Loy, J.W., McPherson, B.D., and Kenyon, G.S., Sport and Social Systems (Reading, Mass.; Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1978), pp.188-190.

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